

• BOOK REVIEWS •

The Argument That Isn't There

HUMAN NATURE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION, by Joseph Wood Krutch. New York: Random House, 1959. 211 pp. \$3.95.

IT IS STRANGE that it does not seem senseless to claim that nihilism has come to pervade our contemporary culture, when the preaching of nihilism has virtually disappeared. The Bakunins of the last century have been long forgotten, not only in their own land, but elsewhere in those great centers where anarchism and syndicalism were once so actively competing among the "idols of the market-place." The Nietzschean voices have been still since the fall of facism; while in America the atheism of Ingersol and the iconoclasm of Mencken have lost their once roisterous edge to become merely quaint historical data. Who can say, indeed, that the preachers are not going quite the other way? From the popular panders who "think happy thoughts" to the brooding mystiques of Niebuhr, Tillich, and Buber, the stress today is on the resurgence and rediscovery of values. Even the "agonized" existentialists have their hearts set on affirming human responsibility, while reams of sweetened psychoanalese beckon us to know, accept, and love ourselves. Where, then, does this nihilism abound, why have we so come to smell its presence? Could it be due to the way our people and institutions are *behaving*, to the *practice* that lies beneath the preaching?

It could be just that. It is not hard to detail the charges, as is now done in so much of our more readable "sociology" devoted to the exposure of our status-seeking, organization-minded, technology-ridden life. It is easy to show that millions of people, regardless of their church attendance, are

at least *acting as though* only material success counts; as though they think they can *buy* happiness, that their shining salvation is the chrome of their new car, and that penitence is simply the mild discomfort of a home in "early American" decor. With the (often impoverished) intellectual who still shares some remnants of old esthetic and conceptual systems, such contempt of modern culture has itself been frequently snobbish and fashionable; and a few of us are beginning to tire of its changeless tune which has too often become an end in itself, a form of pedagogic and cocktail vaudeville, leading to nothing but keener rivalry to find more hilarious examples of petty striving and to draw more ridiculous cartoons.

IF ANYONE has a right to smile at this current farrago of banality and mimicry it is Joseph Wood Krutch—hard as it is for him to smile. This old complainer, this old nag, has stayed true blue for, lo, these many years, lamenting that the past is really past, that greatness is no longer great, nobility no longer noble, and art no longer art. Since this distinguished Columbia professor wrote *The Modern Temper* thirty years ago, he has sounded the same disquieting monotone that appears in his new book, *Human Nature and the Human Condition*. Having recently retired to the southwest, he has done some charming writing on the life of the desert; but the unexpected trek from Morningside Heights to Yuccaland has only brightened the hope that at least Krutch-nature (if not human nature) can keep its integrity amid drastic changes of "the human condition." During his academic years Krutch certainly weathered his share of opprobrium. Reviled by the Marxists in the thirties as a precious reactionary who could not see the role of class conflict in art, he has since, among many other retaliations, been rebuked by Arthur Miller for asserting that tragedy must emerge from great (rather than common) men, and was caustically attacked by Bertrand Russell for contending that love (to be love) must somehow be religious rather than biological. All these duels and unpleasantries have evidently left him as serene as though nothing had ever happened.

In fact, Krutch's new book is admirable for its purity and composure of modern American prose, its absence of vindictive or *ad hominem* resentments, and its many patient generalities about our time. He has much reason to feel secure. He had to brave the dedicated generation which thought that the success of the New Deal would bring the millenium, that sixty million jobs would make grease-monkeys into humanists, and that the defeat of Hitler would prove Stalin to be another Ghandi. Despite his chronic indisposition, today we must admit that he was generally right. He wasn't the *only* one who was right, of course, but at least he *was* right when so many glib youngsters were lashing at him for being wrong.

Yet Krutch's main enemies were, to his mind, never the restive, hostile intellectuals of the thirties. He has always chosen more venerable opponents, such as old Thomas Hobbes, and a whole miscellany of people identified with the vague rubrics of environmentalism, behaviorism, positivism, mechanism, materialism, relativism, and nihilism. His latest entreaty is another simple variation on this sweeping rejection.

IN THE PRESENT WORK, Krutch says that human nature is one thing and that the conditions within which human beings happen to survive are quite another thing. He criticizes the belief that human nature is inevitably and completely the result of the human condition. This belief, he feels, has given so many people such a "low opinion" of themselves; yet what underlies this belief?

First of all it is, of course, that body of mechanistic, deterministic philosophy which has undertaken to deprive him of the power to choose, to rob him of the ability to reason, and to reduce his profoundest convictions concerning right and wrong to the status of mere cultural prejudices; which has taught him that he is not, that he cannot be anything more than a product of his conditions.
(p. 100)

The next question is whether or not human nature can resist the effects of the human condition; and if so, in what respects and to what degree?

The pure relativist who denies the existence of *anything* permanent in human nature and who then finds himself shocked by, let us say, the "atrocities" committed against the dead by Nazi authorities is logically bound to tell himself that he is merely reacting according to a prejudice unworthy of one who has come to understand intellectually that custom is never more than custom and that there is no reason why, for instance, corpses should not always be made into useful soap—as they were in Germany during the second world war. (p. 178)

Krutch continues "that such prejudices may not be prejudices at all," but a "revulsion against a practice that violates something fundamental in human nature. . ." Of course, there were at least a certain number of Germans whose special human natures were *not* violated by these deeds and who therefore were not so terribly independent of their conditioning; but one must still admit that the offenses they committed against the living, if not the dead, cut far across the lines of "cultural relativism."

IN THIS NEW BOOK too, then, Krutch looks for absolutes in human nature, for "morals" that do not derive from "mores." Yet he is far readier to suggest *that* there are such absolutes than to state *what* they are (shifting the Kantian *ding-an-sich* into human nature).

It may be true that cultures exhibit such a bewildering variety of actions and attitudes as to give a superficial air of probability to the conclusion that *all* moral ideas and all ideas of what constitutes propriety are no more than what limitlessly variable custom has established. Yet men almost invariably believe that *some* beliefs and *some* customs are right. (p. 179)

While Krutch admits that "God" has been "defined in too many ways to be surely meaningful" (p. 165), and never once says that he believes in God, he still teases the reader with the question, "Does God exist?" which he detours to another question of the "same family," "Does human nature exist?" The semantic suspicion that the two questions are

utterly different both in sense and answerability is quickly dissipated by recognizing that in Krutch's lexicon the expressions "God" and "human nature" are practically synonymous. Finally, Krutch seizes upon little straws in the winds of zoology to distinguish (1) birds who know how to fly by instinct; (2) seals who do not know how to swim by instinct, but may be easily taught by their mothers; and (3) songbirds who could only be taught how to swim with the greatest difficulty. From this he decides, largely in italics, that

There are, in other words, not just two classes of animal behavior (inborn and learned) but also a third—that which is not inborn though the ability to learn it easily is.
(p. 174)

IN SUCH WAYS Krutch prepares to question the thesis of the moral relativists that "since no one was born with the 'innate idea' that dishonesty and treachery are evil, then the conviction that they are evil can be nothing but the result of social education" (p. 175). To this he comments,

May not, in actual fact, the contrary be true, namely, that certain ideas are more *easily learned* than others; that what the eighteenth century called natural law, natural taste, and the rest is real and consists in those beliefs and tastes which are more readily learned and also most productive of health and happiness? (p. 175)

Throughout the book Krutch sprinkles such "maybe's," "perhaps's," and "possibly's" to intimate within the mechanistic, deterministic picture some fork on which the human personality can escape the track of environmentalism and regain its kingly, Hamlet-like, God-like stature. That his persuasion contains no convincing proof, either empirical or rational, Krutch well knows. It rests on sheer additive impact of peevish, fidgety cavils and hinted scepticisms against the dominant knowledge of our era. His case has all the consistency of moral force backed by clear and penetrating argument. But the argument is nowhere to be found.

In the chapter which he so bravely titles "The Meaning of

the Meaningless Question," Krutch makes his metaphysical innuendos somewhat bolder. He contrasts "wisdom," so sought in the past by men who tried to "know the unknowable, to measure the immeasurable, and to touch the intangible," with modern "technology" which is concerned merely with "making and doing." He deplores the current focus on "solvable problems," and the consequent neglect of the great insolvable problems in which he thinks, quite correctly, many earlier men invested their deepest passions, their greatest art, and their most intense intellectual skill. He denies that scientific knowing is the ultimate and fullest kind of knowing, and writes that "many converts to the scientific method as a philosophy have tended to confuse the 'description' of what happened with 'an understanding' of the thing itself" (p. 157). He condemns as limited the search for *how* and implores us to ask "Why?" He wants less faith in "knowledge about" and more quest for "knowledge of." He even cites, albeit with reservation, that queasy Victorian saw about the man who would "peep and botanize upon his mother's grave." While never denouncing scientific inquiry as worthless, he insists that it is necessarily inadequate for true comprehension. He frankly suggests at least a partial sharing of the intuition, "vision," and mysticism of contemporary writers like Huxley. He is seeking the moral man and he does not believe the wholly scientific man can be moral.

NONE of these urgings are new to Krutch nor to our intellectual world, but they manage to keep alive those old, exasperating debates which divide analysis from imagination, and science from art. Krutch's special "humanism" describes

anyone who rejects the attempt . . . to account for man wholly on the basis of physics, chemistry, and animal behavior. He is anyone who believes that will, reason, and purpose are real and significant; that values and justice are aspects of a reality called good and evil and rest on some foundation other than custom; that consciousness is so far from being a mere epiphenomenon that it is the most tremendous of actualities; or, to sum it

all up, that those human realities which sometimes seem to exist only in the human mind are the perceptions, rather than the creations, of that mind. (p. 197)

The platonic echoings of the centuries thus blend with the voices of the mystic, the romantic, and the proud esthete.

The forensic problem in criticizing Krutch is how to do so without looking like a knave. Many people who do not believe in absolutes would still say that human consciousness and values are the most distinguishing and important features of man. It is not easy to deny that wisdom (*whatever* it is) is more precious than mechanical aptitude, or that religious mystics are more interesting than brush salesmen, without appearing to be the grossest philistine. Who cannot agree that the universe, for all of our science, is still fathomlessly mysterious, and that the cognitive human being, however he got to be what he is, is not just about the most fascinating and mysterious phenomenon within it—in fact the one who created (or as Krutch would say, “perceived”) the concept or “reality” of mystery itself? Nor would many of the very people Krutch blames for the habit of “power and wealth” in the modern Western World be willing to accept the blame or approve of the habit. In fact, so much of what Krutch says about our present culture seems so acceptable to the very schools to which he attributes guilt for the condition of this culture, that his naming of the defendants appears as an onslaught on the innocent and an extenuation of those who have really brought the trouble.

What kind of people, indeed, are *practicing* the tawdry, vulgar culture which Krutch so abhors? Is it really the behavioral scientist, the electronic engineer, the positivist, the semanticist, or even the rat psychologist who is going in for the gloss and foam of modern consumer items and suckering into the latest word from Paris and Hollywood as to how to get that one step ahead of one's neighbor? Or is it not quite the other sort of person—the junior executive, the promotions manager, the manufacturer's representative, the advertising salesman, the car dealer—who goes to one of the refined Protestant churches; or the *nouveau riche* working

or lower-middle class gas station owner, or business agent, or police sergeant, or scrap-metal merchant—going to mass or synagogue reliably enough; it is not these who agree, if given a simple questionnaire, more with the words of Krutch than with those he so addicteily castigates? One can still imagine that the "intellectuals" are to blame for what they have come to disavow, of course, as intellectuals often are. But Krutch asks us to nod to his language; and one is afraid he would be most embarrassed by the sort of people who are doing the most frequent and heavy nodding. Such considerations, which could only be supported by a public opinion poll of which Krutch would likely disapprove, nevertheless give their own "perhaps's," "possibly's," and "maybe's" to those who want to send their own parade of verbal pagentry out to compete with his. But apart from verbal parades, there are a number of serious ordinary language questions which can be pressed against the whole Krutch campaign.

IF HUMAN NATURE is "fundamentally independent" of the human condition, why should men like Krutch worry so much about what the human condition is doing to it? Why do they stay so disturbed about the denials of this belief? If the belief is true, as Krutch claims, its denial must be correspondingly false, and should sooner or later, *even* by scientific standards, lose its appeal. Or could it be that the "false" assertion that men are solely the products of their instincts and environment, if taken seriously, will cause men in fact *to become* the products of their instincts and environment? In such case, we would have a most fascinating instance of the "self-fulfilling prophesy," in which the effect of language on behavior is strikingly demonstrated, a possibility which Krutch would not bother to consider. Or is the influence of conditioning only partial and indefinite? If so, the conditioning provided by Krutch's own language may still turn out to be decisive, given a reasonable parity of instinctual *pros* and *cons*. To wield a "perhaps" of our own, perhaps Krutch is, after all, not so much invoking an independent human nature as asking for *another kind of conditioning* similar to what *he*

is trying to give and to what people received in the more "noble" and traditional epochs. Certainly the Neo-Thomists and the "great books" advocates are trying to reform our education on this kind of premise—and they are thus, if not quite *acknowledging*, at least quite desperately *gambling* on a certain *dependence* of human nature on the human condition.

When Krutch maintains, as he has continually, that previous modes of education and influence are more suitable to instinctive human nature than those operating today, of course he finds at his ready command such impressive evidence as Gothic and Baroque architecture, Renaissance painting, and Elizabethan literature, all of which may make many moderns very envious; but to say that such past achievements automatically demonstrate the independence of human nature is merely to conclude what one has already assumed, that is, to beg the question. Certainly no reliable answer (scientific, historical, intuitive, or humanistic) has been found to explain sufficiently the great esthetic, religious, or philosophical peaks of certain ages; and while we must grant that those peaks show the magnificent potential of men everywhere, just as our scientific triumphs do now, they most clearly do not afford reason to believe that the environment of the thirteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries was somehow more intrinsically harmonious with the "basic nature of man" than our conditions of today or any other time. Otherwise we could easily cite the squalor, barbarities, aggressions, and superstitions of those periods to prove that they were *less* compatible with human nature.

KRUTCH'S RELIANCE upon the observations of animal behavior to reveal a certain constancy of inclination within man wavers between the trite and the presumptuous. What if seals *do* learn to swim more easily than they learn to balance circus balls? What if man *does* learn to walk bipedally more easily than he learns to walk on his hands? Does this even plausibly suggest any priority in our acceptance of *ideas*? That all men who learn to think, learn to think *some* things before they learn to think *other* things, is the most pedestrian

kind of tautology. Yet, as Krutch says, there is no *definite* set of ideas, values, or social practices which predominate in *all* societies, or which men seem universally to prefer. Where on earth, then, (and I mean *on earth*) are these fugitive absolutes? *What* are they? Nothing specific at all; never that capital punishment is right or wrong, but that *some* correctives of homicide are right and others wrong; never that the dead should be buried or burned, but that *some* "traditional and ritual" form of disposal is good and another bad.¹ But what manner of absolutes are these? No notorious cultural relativist ever denied that certain common human problems, like homicide or disease, are handled in *some* way by all existing cultures. In fact, this has been a big point of the relativist: *some* way, not any *one* way. Even so, such "universalities" are often so dependent on learning that they are not universal at all. That cows are sacred in some parts of India does not mean that *some* animal is sacred in all other countries. It is only on the most rarefied level of abstraction that such contentions may become tempting: we might say (with some hesitancy) that some *things* are sacred to all people, some acts are considered right and wrong, etc. In short, all cultures, to be cultures, have some internally consistent systems of value, for approval and disapproval, of promise and threat, of reward and punishment. But here we are back to platitude. Nonetheless, the use of value language in varying societies is itself so varying, that it seems rather gratuitous for a particular kind of moralist to call all such language "moralistic" and claim that it all reflects some universal attribute of man. In a certain tribe the act of consuming in the summer food which has been stored for the winter has been described as "robbing a nest of its eggs." What right has the outsider to say that this metaphorical disapprobation expresses a "universal sense of evil?" The "universality" seems to lie entirely in the mind of the westerner.

¹ For some uncanny reason, Krutch repeats this almost prurient concern about removal of the dead, always with the hint that it represents some absolute value for human nature. Since cadavers do not reliably etherialize for a trip to Valhalla, but tend to remain

KRUTCH's quasi-mysticism, his distinction between "knowledge about" and "knowledge of," has, of course, venerable philosophic lineage, even including the pragmatist's distinction between "knowledge" and "acquaintance." But Krutch tries to squeeze it to the last drop. Now speaking of drops, no sane person would deny that hearing a description of the taste of a new wine is quite different from actually tasting the wine. Nor would anyone suppose that tasting the wine is not a fuller way of judging the wine than merely reading about its taste. And certainly, to most people, being in love is a more indelible response than learning the chemical reactions of persons in love. True enough, parts of our intellectual society have been too prone to place excessive value on such verbal descriptions at the cost of the experiences themselves. But who has warned us against this tendency more than Dr. Krutch? Why Alfred Korzybski—and all that crowd of despised semanticists!

Alas, the brief truce is done with, because no semanticist could accept Krutch's companion distinction between "knowing why" and "knowing how." This is a totally different kind of distinction, although the book gives no inkling of this. Tasting the wine and being in love do not disclose *why* the wine tastes as it does or *why* we are in love any more than they reveal how our taste buds function or our heart palpitates. Yet Krutch regards "knowing why" as affording a deeper "explanation" (which he admits is a tricky word) than *merely* "knowing how," and as yielding "a fuller understanding of the thing itself" (p. 157). There are indeed situations we confront with common speech in which such

motionless on the surface of the earth, often in a most inconvenient location, it is not surprising that in all working societies the surviving should take steps to move or transform them, thus manifesting, I suppose, some "universal" desire not to be contaminated or infected, as well as some common fear of personal mortality. Incidentally, as Krutch bemoans so admirably the "vulgar" aspects of contemporary society, does he consider the solemn commercial humbug of the "memorial park" (*alias* "cemetery") and the "memorial chapel" (*alias* "funeral home," *alias* "mortuary," *alias* "undertaker") as current revelations of some unspoiled absolute in human nature?

a view makes good sense. We do gain a "fuller understanding" of the chateau of Chambord if we know *why* it was erected; if we want to know the important thing about a scream we ask *why* someone is screaming. We intelligently ask "Why?" when we presuppose that some phenomenon is the result of human or animal purpose or activity. Under this presupposition, then, we would more fully understand a tidal wave if we knew *why* Neptune ordered it; and of course we would get a far better grasp of a lunar eclipse if we knew *why* the heavenly dog suddenly decided to swallow the moon.

Naturally, Krutch is not guilty of such presuppositions (or maybe it is because of his conditioning). Then one must wonder what he means by "knowledge why" when he writes about objects and events not humanly caused. Obviously the word "why" is equivocal; in the vernacular it mainly refers to the reasons human beings have for doing what they did. But when we ask the "why" of a sunset or a rock pile on the Arizona desert, we must be using that three-letter combination by a very different set of rules; *this* Krutch never seems to see. Or maybe he *does* see it; and is simply changing the meaning of "why" to refer to those feelings of intimate contact and absorption which we sometimes have when we witness sunsets and desolate rockpiles. In such case his "why" is not the "why" of ordinary whyness, but the "why" of the mystic, the immersion man, the bold plunger-in, indeed a very different kind of "why." If so, his "knowledge why" truly becomes synonymous with his "knowledge of." But if so, *why* doesn't he say so?

Krutch has a way of lumping all of his opposition together. Mechanists, materialists, behaviorists, positivists, semanticists—all get identified as *his* enemy. The fact that even the crude early logical positivists, not to mention the sophisticated linguistic philosophers of today, could not possibly, by the rules of their own systems, endorse any form of traditional mechanism or materialism, is not even faintly recognized. Krutch seems totally reluctant to admit any important differences among the vast range of people he has come to dislike. He prefers to think they are all equal partners in

the great crime against humanity, all equal devotees to "making and doing," all equal scorers of "wisdom." To be sure all of these people have accepted the scientific rather than the animistic approach to things; and they all recognize that the singular achievement of science is its ability to predict and control. But once this is granted, wholly different sets of values may compete for acclaim. Krutch's own humanism is in no way incompatible with the outlook of many of the schools he so severely chastises.

ALONG WITH the idealists and the neo-scholastics, Krutch represents another form of absolutism which is trying to undermine trust in the modern methods of rational inquiry and analysis. His absolutism is not, however, so much one of "first principles" as one of first feelings, first emotions, first faiths—almost biological at times. That man has common organic dispositions is certainly no news to the behavioral scientist; in fact the environmentalist has stressed this very point to show why conditioning *is* so important; were human beings not sufficiently alike no kind of training or conditioning could possibly work. But to grant certain physiological absolutes does not justify belief in moral absolutes. Krutch honestly fears that our civilization will perish if people think their own standards and values are only relatively valid. He suspects an insidious cynicism to be seeping into the minds of men based on the position that what is good is only what is good "for me." All he can see along this path is vulgarity, commercialism, exploitation, and nuclear war. Many of the rest of us share this fear. But we attribute the danger, not to a belief in relativism, but to dogma, intolerance, and self-righteousness, practices of which Krutch is innocent, but which are more frequently associated with beliefs in some absolute than with the perspective of relativism.

Even though his style is more suggestive and insinuating than polemical, Krutch at no time shows any distrust of his own language. The simplicity of his prose is deceptive, and the familiarity of his favorite terms (like "of," "why," "conviction," "knowledge," etc.) can be so easily mistaken for

intellectual clarity. Because such expressions are used so often, they have become very vague and ambiguous and depend almost entirely upon their context for meaning. But Krutch's sentences so often contain only more words of the same promiscuous breed. To say that "knowledge *why* gives a fuller understanding of the thing itself" only permits the key terms to reinforce one another's vagary.

Of course an absolutism enshrouded in such atmospheric verbiage is probably not nearly so frightening as some of the more exact absolutisms which still surround us; an absolutism which merely says that there *are* absolutes is safer than the absolutism which says just *what* the absolutes are. But the one kind still gives a rationale for the other; and many of us believe that the world can well do without both kinds while still holding to most of the specific values of humanists like Krutch. In fact, these specific values, whether innate or nurtured, seem to us so important today that it is a shame to see their holders disrupted and divided by a partisanship less founded on incisive reasoning than on nostalgic ethical and literary alliances.

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Colloids by Any Other Name

SCIENTIFIC EPISTEMOLOGIC BACKGROUNDS OF GENERAL SEMANTICS: LECTURES ON ELECTRO-COLLOIDAL STRUCTURES, by Marjorie A. Swanson. Lakeville, Connecticut: Institute of General Semantics, 1959. 81 pp. \$5.

MOST PEOPLE will agree that changes of some kind must take place in a man when he solves a difficult equation, reacts to a well-turned ankle, or explodes in a fit of anger as he reads an editorial. A psychologist may talk about thoughts and feelings; a psychoanalyst may invoke such concepts as "ego" and "id"; a physiologist may describe these events in terms of nerve impulses, glandular reactions, and muscle tensions; a neurologist may refer to electrical impulses, syn-